

Where Are the Women Geniuses?

This famed author could find none; then she remembered the story of Jane Addams and her search ended

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

■ For 50 years, Kathleen Norris has been a best-selling novelist and popular short-story writer. She has written some 70 novels, including "The Venables," "Shadow Marriage," and "Miss Harriet Townsend," and is widely respected as an interpreter of modern woman and her emergence as a force in American life since World War I.

SOME YEARS AGO, a distinguished biologist, Albert Wiggam, who had written a popular book called, "The Fruit of the Family Tree," challenged his readers with the question, "Where are the women geniuses?"

The mere asking of this question answered itself as far as the scientist was concerned, but the editor of a magazine asked me to write what I could in reply. I set about it with enthusiasm—but immediately the astonishing and humiliating truth stood forth in incontrovertible clarity.

There are no women geniuses.

In science, medicine, architecture, business, and, above all, in the absorbing fascination of the arts of war, women's names are conspicuously absent.

But in the fine arts—the great treasures of our libraries, galleries, opera houses—surely there I would find women.

I had to abandon the search, however. Through all the years, the laurels for music, art, letters have never gone to women. Men have found no feminine name to place beside those of Shakespeare, Goethe, Michelangelo, Dante, Bach. No, nor to rank with Chaucer, Tolstoi, Vermeer, Browning, Wagner, Chopin, da Vinci.

No women geniuses, then. But why?

And then suddenly there dawned upon me a great light, a light that perhaps had been too close, too long accepted to be seen with everyday vision. And, with Alice, I could rub my eyes and burst out, "Why, you're nothing but a pack of cards!"

You are only copyists, after all, you men of genius. You watch, you study, and after hours of agony you capture glimpses of man's heart and soul, and inspire the naked canvas, the dead words of dead men, the lifeless clay and insensate strings

and keys of great instruments with glorious life. Your model is not life but of life; and your achievement that perfect representation of life that makes us give you our highest praise which inevitably must include the word, "lifelike."

But nobody ever looked at even the best-behaved of American nurseries at the supper-bath hour with the admiring observation: "Don't the children seem lifelike!" They are life, and more—they are the incomparable products of the finest of all the arts. They are the masterpieces of women, living, growing, essential. To turn from them to muddle about with mere plaster and ink and catgut is a secondary prospect indeed!

Woman's masterpieces have always had a different quality. None of the happy women who will emerge from the kitchen this evening, bearing the family meal, would even turn aside at the great news that the "Mona Lisa" was being shown at that very moment at the high school. Her masterpiece is right there, at the dining-room table. No woman in the world would exchange the power called "relief" that lies in her two hands, for the copy of life that is called "art."

It was for Jane Addams to raise this work of women to the pitch of geniuses, to join that company of great women who have brought sanity and comfort to a suffering world. This is the Jane Addams whose centennial we celebrate this year. With the supreme simplicity and dedication of a medieval saint, she rose to challenge entrenched poverty, suffering, sin; and time will not weaken her influence nor hinder the work that she began.

LIKE YOU AND ME, she might easily have turned away from the slums, the filth, the crime of the crowded streets. She might have told her sickened soul that whatever effort any one woman could make to lessen the suffering all about her would be but one pitiful drop in a very ocean of these blighted, embittered, darkened lives. If she did, she crushed back hesitation, fear, doubt, and perhaps faced the enormity of the situation with the little phrase that becomes one of my vivid memories:

"Yes. I see. Well, what we must do is . . ."

What she did do, we all know; it will forever be a part of America's story. She found a dilapidated old mansion, and without money of her own, without influential friends, it was bought, rehabilitated, turned into a clearing house for the miseries all about it. And, as Hull House, it was to become famous throughout the nation and to bring a thousand-thousand masterpieces to completion.

The forlorn babies of the slums found themselves out in the sunshine, under the trees, and on the wide lawns of Chicago's first playground for children. The first children's court was established because of Jane Addams' championship of child offenders. Her voice spoke out against child labor in factories, and the laws were changed; and her advocacy of equal suffrage spurred women into politics.

AND FINALLY, she directed her most powerful crusade of all against the stupidity, cruelty, and waste of war. She formed the greatest of the women's peace organizations, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

The League was formed in Europe; it was when she brought it to America that I first met her. She was neither beautiful nor young; hers was an unobtrusive, settled, matronly figure. But by this time she had gained an international power; by this time she was not refused honor, consideration, help. There was something in the level, steady look of her beautiful eyes, something in the quiet authority of her voice, that so greatly affected one. Every inch of her said strength, goodness, faith.

She was to receive many honors before she died in her 75th year. She was to leave thousands of other women to face, as she had faced, problems of misunderstanding, powerlessness, and the weakness of their numbers in joining battle with the great evil called war. Thousands of them have followed their leader to a different world, thousands fight on today, and other thousands will take up their work in days to come. And high above them will always stand the memory of the woman of genius who lighted the flame: Jane Addams.



Jane Addams spent most of her 75 years championing children's rights and world peace.

COVER:

The youngsters in Victor Mays' drawing are not playing hide-and-seek. But feeling very much in the Christmas spirit, they've laden a pine tree with fruit and vegetables for their flock of forest friends.

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